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ENGLISH VERSIONS BEFORE 1611

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Englishmen have read the Scriptures in their own tongue for more than a thousand years. It was one of the most sacred tasks of the Venerable Bede to give to his countrymen in the very year of his death (735) a translation of the Gospel of John. From the age that followed, that brilliant age when Lindisfarne and Whitby and Jarrow were centers of northern learning until the coming of the Danes, we have various versions of the gospels and Psalms. By the time of King Alfred's death (901) there had been produced in addition Old English versions of the historical books of the Old Testament, and perhaps of other portions of the Scriptures. Some of these have been attributed to the pious industry of the great king himself.

But if we reckon from the Norman Conquest, the earliest English versions are of course those produced toward the close of the fourteenth century by John Wycliffe and his followers. It appears that the project of rendering the Bible into the common speech of England was one of the very latest that engaged the attention of the great Oxford reformer of Chaucer's age. When Wycliffe was formally tried and convicted in 1382, among the many charges brought against him this was not explicitly mentioned. Though the New Testament had doubtless been completed by that time its existence could not have been widely known. A paralytic stroke later in the year 1382 must have impaired his energies, but the revision of the New Testament is supposed to have been finished during the following two years preceding his death, December 31, 1384.

Wycliffe had committed the translation of the Old Testament to his disciple Nicholas of Hereford, whom he had doubtless met at Oxford. Hereford suffered condemnation with his master in 1382, but escaped death by the powerful assistance of John of

THE
FIRST BOOKE
OF MOSES,
called GENESIS.

CHAP. I.

1 The creation of Heauen and Earth, 4 of the light, 6 of the firmament, 9 of the earth separated from the waters, 11 and made fructiual, 14 of the Sunne, Moone, and Starres, 20 of fish and fowle, 24 of beasts and cattell, 26 of Man in the Image of God. 29 Also the appointment of food.

In the beginning God created the heauen, and the Earth.
2 And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darke: nefe was vpon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooued vpon the face of the waters.

3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God diuided the light from the darkenesse.

5 And God called the light, Day, and the darknesse he called Night: and the Evening and the Morning were the first day.

6 And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters: and let it diuide the waters from the waters.

7 And God made the firmament, and diuided the waters, which were vnder the firmament, from the waters, which were aboue the firmament: and it was so.

8 And God called the firmament, Heauen: and the Evening and the Morning were the second day.

9 And God said, Let the waters vnder the heauen be gathered together vnto one place, and let the dry land appeare: and it was so.

10 And God called the dry land, Earth, and the gathering together of the waters called hee, Seas: and God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, Let the Earth bring forth grass, the herbe yielding seed, and the fruct tree, yielding fruit after his kinde, whose seed is in it selfe, vpon the earth: and it was so.

12 And the earth brought forth grass, and herbe yielding seed after his kinde, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in it selfe, after his kinde: and God saw that it was good.

13 And the Evening and the Morning were the third day.

14 And God saide, Let there bee lights in the firmament of the heauen, to diuide the day from the night: and let them bee for signes and for seasons, and for dayes and yeres.

15 And let them bee for lights in the firmament of the heauen, to giue light vpon the earth: and it was so.

16 And God made two great lightes: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the starres also.

17 And God set them in the firmament of the heauen, to giue light vpon the earth:

18 And to rule ouer the day, and ouer

Gen. 1. 15.

Gen. 1. 11. 7. and 1. 16. 5. and 1. 18. 8.

Gen. 1. 11. 7. and 1. 16. 5. and 1. 18. 8.

Gen. 1. 15. 16. 7. 18. 8.

Gen. 1. 15. 16. 7. 18. 8.

Gen. 1. 15. 16. 7. 18. 8.

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Gen. 1. 15. 16. 7. 18. 8.

THE KING JAMES VERSION

(Second Issue of 1611)

Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, a patron of the Lollards for reasons best known to himself. Hereford's work seems suddenly to have been interrupted by the trial and never resumed; for in the original manuscript, still preserved in the Bodleian Library, the translation ends at Baruch 3:20. The remainder of the Old Testament and the revision of the whole work belongs to a second Wycliffite scholar, John Purvey. He was superior in scholarship to Hereford and did much to improve the crude literalisms of his predecessor. Hereford, indeed, in his slavish adherence to the Vulgate idioms, produced a monstrosity never paralleled except by some of the most striking infelicities of the translators of Rheims and Douay. His version was therefore largely superseded by Purvey's. The revised Bible appears to have been completed at Bristol by 1388. Purvey, like Hereford, was threatened with death, but like him escaped through a measure of recantation. The later life of both these men is one of discreet conformity under the severe régime of Henry V. Their work on the Old Testament, though by no means equal to Wycliffe's on the New, is worthy of remembrance as the first complete translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into English.

Purvey's prologue setting forth his principles of translation is a document quite as interesting in its way as the preface of King James's time. The four steps enumerated by Purvey are as follows:

To gedere manie elde bibles, and othere doctoris, and comune glosis, and to make oo Latyn bible sumdel trewe, and thanne to studie it of the new, the text with the glose, and othere doctoris, as he mighte, and speciali Lire [Nicholas de Lyra] on the elde testament, that helpid full myche in this werk; the thridde tyme to counsel with elde grammarians and elde dyvynis of harde wordes and harde sentences how these mighte best be understode and translated; the fourthe tyme to translate as clearlie as he coulde to the sentence, and to have manie good felawis and kunnynges at the correcting of the translacioun.

"Many good fellows and cunning" besides these three, Wycliffe, Hereford, and Purvey, doubtless contributed to the improvement and diffusion of the Lollard versions. Although the circulation of them was absolutely forbidden by the Convocation of Oxford in 1408, the rigors of fifteenth-century inquisitors did not suffice to stop their increase. More than one hundred and fifty manuscripts of the Wycliffite versions now in existence belong for the most

part to the reigns of Henry V and Henry VI. It is a mistake to suppose that the delay of the English Reformation meant that Tudor Englishmen were entirely without the Scriptures until Tyndale. While the Middle English of Chaucer's age was of course obsolete and obscure by the accession of Henry VII in 1485, yet these manuscripts of the Wycliffite versions seem to have been in use well on into the sixteenth century. With all their crudities, their utter dependence on the Vulgate, and corrupt texts of the Vulgate at that, they had a large part in keeping the evangelical leaven at work during the long strife of York and Lancaster.

Although William Caxton introduced printing into England in 1471, more than half a century was to elapse before the English Bible was put into type. Before the end of the fifteenth century continental printers issued translations of the Bible (from the Vulgate, of course) in all the important languages of Europe, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, German, and Bohemian; but in England the attitude of church and state made the printing of Wycliffe's version out of the question, and the time had not yet come for a new translation from the original. When the new learning reached Oxford at the end of the reign of Henry VII, the university became a center of Greek studies for eager young scholars from every quarter of the kingdom. Hither came William Tyndale, a native of Gloucestershire, to study under Grocyn, Linacre, Latimer, and Colet. In 1510 he went to Cambridge to join the classes of Erasmus. By the time that he returned to the West about 1521 to earn his living as a tutor and private chaplain, his plan was well fixed to translate the New Testament. His opinions led to local controversies, in one of which he uttered his famous promise that "if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did."

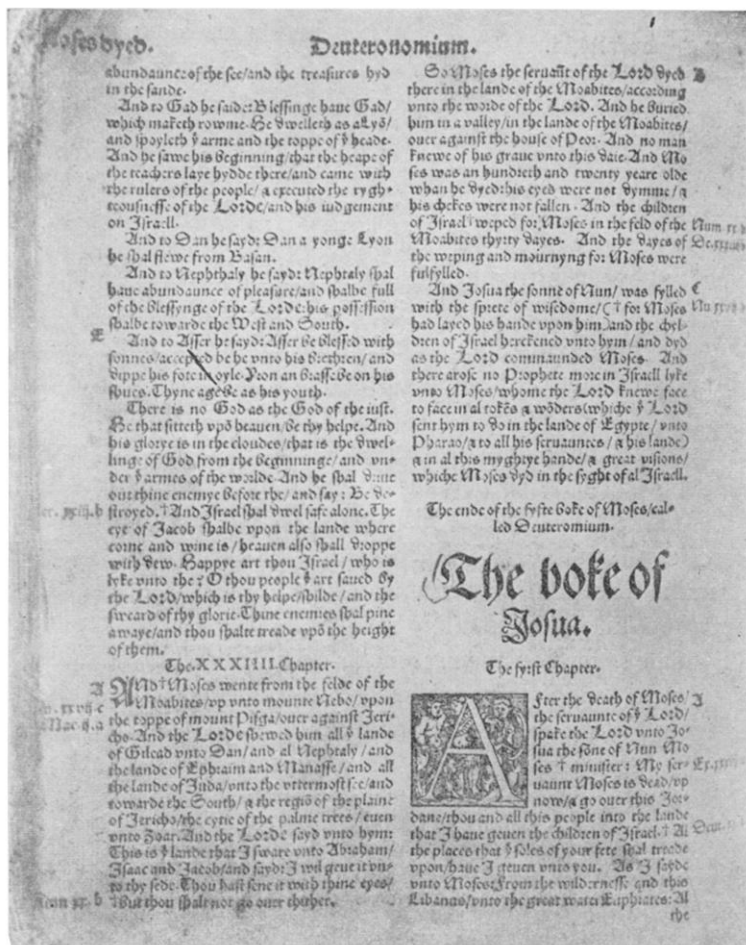
Tyndale's bold plan was original, for he had announced it before the publication of Luther's New Testament in 1522. But, failing to secure in London the co-operation of Bishop Tunstal, he left England in 1524 and is supposed to have made his way to the headquarters of the German Reformation at Wittenberg. It is also supposed that it was here that Tyndale learned Hebrew and completed his translation of the New Testament. The printing

of this book, the first English version since Wycliffe, and the first ever made from the Greek, was completed at Worms in 1526. Of the six thousand copies said to have been printed only one incomplete quarto and two octavos are now extant: an eloquent testimony to the vigilance of the officers of church and state who proscribed the work. The printers of Antwerp who repeatedly issued unauthorized editions to supply the growing demand in England had no hesitation in selling wholesale lots to the emissaries of Tunstal for destruction. With the proceeds of such sales they promptly issued new impressions. Tyndale's New Testament was admirably advertised by the bitter attacks upon it of Sir Thomas More.

Meanwhile Tyndale was writing controversial works and translating the Pentateuch. That this translation was made from the Hebrew, not from Luther, may be demonstrated by a critical comparison of the three texts together with the Vulgate.¹ Tyndale's Hebrew scholarship was formerly underrated, but it is now generally believed that he worked with greater freedom and facility in this field than either of his immediate successors. He did, of course, avail himself of Luther's and the other German versions; but unlike Coverdale he varied at will from Luther and the Vulgate when they did not adequately render the Hebrew.

Tyndale's work on the first modern English Bible, including the Pentateuch, Jonah, perhaps the later historical books, and the New Testament, is the work that ought to be chiefly remembered with gratitude for all time to come. Whatever may be said of the translation of 1611, most that is best in it goes back to Tyndale. While his tragic death at Vilvorde in 1536 prevented him from completing the Old Testament, it is not too much to say that the simple, vigorous style of his version became the model for all later translators; and that what we now call biblical English, unapproachable for directness and for grandeur, is his. "Many good fellows and cunning" have had a hand in it in later days, but the honor is due to him who labored in danger and in exile, hunted and harassed, striving to fulfil the dream of his youth by bringing the word of God home to the ploughboys of his native land.

¹ See the writer's *Tyndale's Version of the Pentateuch*, The University of Chicago Press, 1906.



THE FIRST ENGLISH BIBLE: COVERDALE'S

(Edition of 1537)

Yet the first complete modern English Bible was a noble achievement, and for it Miles Coverdale deserves high praise. Those who have turned the pages of the handsome volume, printed at Zürich in 1535, must marvel at the industry of the man who so laboriously rendered the Scriptures out of "Douche and Latyne." Coverdale was said by Foxe to have helped Tyndale translate the Pentateuch, but this statement is now unanimously discredited. Coverdale's Hebrew scholarship was not large. The five versions which he mentions as his sources are generally supposed to have been the Vulgate, the Latin of Pagninus, Luther, the Zürich version of Leo Juda, and Tyndale; or perhaps in place of one of these should be substituted the Latin translation of the Old Testament by Sebastian Münster, the great Hebraist, published in 1534. But while in translating the Old Testament he depended chiefly on the German versions, and cannot be credited with much original or consistent scholarship, we must give him all due honor for transforming the crudities of the Wycliffite English into the fine sonorities of our Psalms and prophets. It is true that there were many changes in the Old Testament between 1535 and 1611, but Coverdale's English can be detected through them all. Without the zeal, the learning, or the consistency of Tyndale, he had still that feeling for prose rhythm that was so rare even in Tudor days, and now is well-nigh lost out of English speech.

Coverdale's Bible was followed in 1537 by that which passed under the name of Thomas Matthew, really the work in large measure of the martyr John Rogers. This was made up of Tyndale's Pentateuch and (according to tradition) historical books, Coverdale's version of the remainder of the Old Testament, and Tyndale's New Testament. The changes consisted rather in the omission of controversial notes and prologues than in alterations of the text. Matthew's Bible reached England at a time when the king was about to reverse his policy toward Bible translations. Bishops and clergy had for years been petitioning for a new translation to supply the public demand and to take the place of Tyndale's polemical version. Both Cranmer and Cromwell urged Matthew's Bible upon the favorable consideration of the king. It now became a matter of political scheming to continue the process of national-

izing the English church by making a virtue of necessity in authorizing a translation. Accordingly we have the interesting spectacle of the king and his archbishop formally licensing for public use a version of which at least one-half was the proscribed text of Tyndale. Matthew's Bible may indeed be called in a sense the first authorized version; though that title belongs more properly to its immediate successor, the "Great Bible" of 1539.

This latter work, named from its imposing folio form, was carried through by Cranmer with the co-operation of his leading bishops, some of whom are stated to have made new translations of the portions allotted to them, while others evidently did no more than revise Coverdale's text. Coverdale himself was employed by Cranmer to see the Bible through the press. Printing was begun at Paris, but after interference by the Inquisition the sheets, presses, and type were removed to London, where the work was completed in 1539. With its title-page containing an engraving of the king delivering copies of the Scriptures to clergy and laity, the volume was evidently in the fullest sense authorized. The second edition (1540) bore on its title-page the statement, "This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches." It is for this reason that its version of the Psalms was used in the Book of Common Prayer, where it has remained ever since. The Great Bible was not a new translation but a careful revision from a conservative standpoint. Between the extreme on the one hand of Tyndale, who would use no word of ecclesiastical connotation such as "church," "charity," "penance," and the equally extreme demand of Bishop Gardiner, who would have had nearly a hundred Latin words transferred from the Vulgate without translation because of their "majestic" associations, Cranmer and his associates steered a middle course.

During the two generations that elapsed between the Great Bible and the reign of James, many editions appeared. Of these the most important were the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishops' Bible (1568), and the Roman Catholic version published at Rheims (New Testament, 1582) and Douay (Old Testament, 1609-10).

The Geneva Bible is of greater popular importance than any other version before 1611 for the reason that, owing to its conven-

ient form and its Calvinistic origin, it became the Bible of early Puritanism, and indeed the household Bible of Elizabethan England. It was edited by three Englishmen resident in Geneva, Whittingham, Gilby, and Sampson, and was printed there in 1560. With its roman type superseding the black letter of earlier versions, its novel division into verses, and its marginal commentary, it soon became widely popular. At church one heard the text of the Great Bible, or after 1568, of the Bishops' Bible, an official revision of Cranmer's made at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign; but in the homes, in the secret and public assemblies of the Puritans, on the lips of the common people, were the phrases of the Geneva version.

How slight after all were the differences in all these sixteenth-century versions after Coverdale's is best realized by contrast with the strange and rude phraseology of the Roman Catholic translation of Rheims and Douay. This rendering of the Vulgate in its earlier forms stands alone among English Bibles since Hereford in its singular infelicities and obscurities of style.

It is fitting to point out in conclusion that the English style of the Bible is not, as is sometimes supposed, the prevailing prose style of Jacobean or of Elizabethan England, as anyone may see who reads Bacon and Jonson and Sidney. Neither is it the prevailing style of the reign of Henry VIII, as anyone may see who reads Sir Thomas More and the ecclesiastical writers of that period. In its simplicity it is in part an inevitable reflection of the original, but chiefly the inheritance from the New Testaments of Wycliffe and Tyndale who, because they were lovers of the people, put the people's book into the people's speech. And in its dignity, especially in such works as the Psalms and the prophets, it inherits through Coverdale the best qualities of the Latin and German versions which he employed. At no period before or since the sixteenth century has the English language been so well adapted to the perfect translation of sacred books. In that age when Saxon straightforwardness in narrative and Latin dignity in exalted discourse reached perfect balance, it was our happy destiny to have the Word of God "treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life."